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Designing Effective English Language Teaching Materials

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ABSTRACT

There are many reasons why English language teachers may choose to construct their own teaching materials, despite the availability of commercially produced materials. This paper presents some of these reasons by examining advantages and disadvantages of teacher-produced materials. The authors also suggest factors that teachers should take into account when designing or adapting materials for diverse learners, and present a set of guidelines for designing effective materials for teaching and learning English.

KEYWORDS: teaching, EFL, material designing, material adaptation, material evaluation, effective teaching methods.

Teaching materials form an important part of most English teaching programmes. From textbooks, videotapes and pictures to the Internet, teachers rely heavily on a diverse range of materials to support their teaching and their students' learning. However, despite the current rich array of English language teaching materials commercially available, many teachers continue to produce their own materials for classroom use. Indeed, most teachers spend considerable time finding, selecting, evaluating, adapting and making materials to use in their teaching. In this paper we synthesize a range of ideas from the literature on materials design. We consider why teachers might want to design their own teaching materials and look at some of the advantages and disadvantages. We examine some factors that teachers need to take into account when considering designing their own materials; and finally we present ten guidelines for designing effective English teaching materials.

Factors to Consider When Designing Materials

1. Learners. The first and most important factor to be considered is the learners. If the point of teacher-created materials is relevance, interest, motivation and meeting specific individual needs, then clearly teachers must ensure they know their learners well. Any consideration of syllabus or materials design must begin with a needs analysis. This should reveal learning needs with regard to English language skills in listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary knowledge and grammar; as well as individual student's learning preferences. It is not just learning needs that are relevant to the teacher as materials designer, however. Equally important is knowledge about students' experiences (life and educational), their first language and levels of literacy in it, their aspirations, their interests and their purposes for learning English.

2. The curriculum and the context are variables that will significantly impact on decisions about teaching materials. Many teachers are bound by a mandated curriculum defining the content, skills and values to be taught. Whether imposed at school or state level, a curriculum outlines the goals and objectives for the learners and the course of study. Whatever the curriculum, it is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that the goals and objectives of the overarching curriculum are kept close at hand when designing materials (Nunan, 1988). As noted earlier, the context in which the teaching and learning occurs will impact on the types of materials that may need to be designed. For example, a primary-level mainstream, English-speaking setting, with a set curriculum and access to native speakers may require materials that facilitate interaction about subject content, and develop cognitive academic language proficiency. However, refugee adults may need teaching materials that focus on meeting immediate survival needs and gaining employment.

3. The resources and facilities available to the teacher-designer are also mentioned above as an element of context. Clearly teachers must be realistic about what they can achieve in terms of materials design and production within the limitations of available resources and facilities. Access to resources such as computers (with or without Internet access), a video player and TV, radio, cassette recorder, CD player, photocopier, language lab., digital camera, whiteboard, OHP, scissors, cardboard, laminator etc will impact on decisions in materials design. Hadfield and Hadfield (2003) offer some useful suggestions for 'resourceless' teaching which address the impoverished reality of some teaching contexts.

4. Personal confidence and competence are factors that will determine an individual teacher's willingness to embark on materials development. This will be influenced by the teacher's level of teaching experience and his or her perceived creativity or artistic skills and overall understanding of the principles of materials design and production. In reality, most teachers undertake materials design to modify, adapt or supplement a coursebook, rather than starting from scratch, and this is probably the most realistic option for most teachers. Decisions available to teachers include the following (adapted from Harmer, 2001 and Lamie, 1999):

1. Add activities to those already suggested.
2. Leave out activities that do not meet your learners' needs.
3. Replace or adapt activities or materials with:
 - supplementary materials from other commercial texts
 - authentic materials (newspapers, radio reports, films etc)
 - teacher-created supplementary materials.
4. Change the organizational structure of the activities, for example, pairs, small groups or whole class.

Modern technology provides teachers with access to tools that enable professional results in materials production. Computers with Clipart, Internet access and digital pictures offer unprecedented means for publishing high quality teaching materials.

5. Copyright compliance. A less exciting, but nevertheless important factor to consider in designing materials is copyright compliance. Teachers need to be aware of the restrictions that copyright laws place on the copying of authentic materials, published materials and materials downloaded from the Internet for use in the classroom. This is particularly important when creating course materials that will be used by a large number of classes over time. Copyright law has implications when creating materials that include excerpts from published works. An example of this would be creating a worksheet that uses a picture or exercise from

a commercial text, alongside teacher-created activities. While an idea cannot be copyright, the expression of the idea can be and teachers need to be mindful of this.

6. Time was discussed earlier as a disadvantage for teachers who wish to design their own materials. It is thus, important to consider ways to make this aspect manageable. Block (1991) suggests a number of ways in which teachers can lighten the load, including sharing materials with other teachers, working in a team to take turns to design and produce materials, and organizing central storage so materials are available to everyone.

Teacher designed materials may range from one-off, single use items to extensive programmes of work where the tasks and activities build on each other to create a coherent progression of skills, concepts and language items. The guidelines that follow may act as a useful framework for teachers as they navigate the range of factors and variables to develop materials for their own teaching situations. The guidelines are offered as just that – guidelines – not rules to be rigidly applied or adhered to. While not all the guidelines will be relevant or applicable in all materials design scenarios, overall they provide for coherent design and materials which enhance the learning experience.

It is impossible for teachers to teach their learners all the language they need to know in the short time that they are in the classroom. In addition to teaching valuable new language skills, it is essential that language teaching materials also teach their target learners how to learn, and that they help them to take advantage of language learning opportunities outside the classroom. Hall (1995) stresses the importance of providing learners with the confidence to persist in their attempts to find solutions when they have initial difficulties in communicating. To this end, strategies such as rewording and using facial expressions and body language effectively can be fine-tuned with well-designed materials.

In addition, materials can provide valuable opportunities for self-evaluation by providing the necessary metalanguage and incorporating activities which encourage learners to assess their own learning and language development. This can utilize the learners' first language as well as English. Some EFL course books, such as Ellis & Sinclair (1989), also build in exercises for students to explore their own learning styles and strategies.

Language teaching materials can tend to focus on one particular skill in a somewhat unnatural manner. Some courses have a major focus on productive skills, and in these reading and listening become second-rate skills. With other materials, reading or writing may dominate. Bell & Gower (1998) point out that, "at the very least we listen and speak together, and read and write together" (p. 125). Ideally, materials produced should give learners opportunities to integrate all the language skills in an authentic manner and to become competent at integrating extra-linguistic factors also.

To conclude, one potential pitfall for teacher-designed materials mentioned in the first part of this article relates to the organization within and between individual tasks. There is a very real danger with self-designed and adapted materials that the result can be a hotchpotch of unconnected activities. Clearly stated objectives at the outset of the design process will help ensure that the resultant materials have coherence, and that they clearly progress specific learning goals while also giving opportunities for repetition and reinforcement of earlier learning.

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